

The Elegy

Lyric Poems of Loss

What Is an Elegy?

An elegy is a poem that mourns the death of a person or laments something lost.



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Characteristics of the Elegy

An elegy

- is a type of lyric and focuses on expressing emotions or thoughts
- usually uses formal language and structure
- is usually solemn or even melancholy in tone

Characteristics of the Elegy

An elegy may lament the passing of

- life and beauty
- something the speaker held dear

The days are gone
When the kingdoms of earth flourished in glory;
Now there are no rulers, no emperors,
No givers of gold, as once there were,
When wonderful things were worked among them
And they lived in lordly magnificence.
Those powers have vanished, those pleasures are dead.

from "The Seafarer," translated by Burton Raffel

From "The Seafarer" from *Poems from the Old English*, translated by Burton Raffel. Copyright © 1960, 1964, 1998 by Burton Raffel. Reproduced by permission of Yale University Press.

Characteristics of the Elegy

An elegy may explore profound questions about

- the nature of life and death
- the immortality of the soul

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type^o she seems,
So careless of the single life

from *In Memoriam A.H.H.* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

^o type: species.

Characteristics of the Elegy

An elegy may express the speaker's

- anger about death
- resistance to its inevitability

O life as futile, then, as frail!
O for thy voice to soothe and bless!
What hope of answer, or redress?
Behind the veil, behind the veil.

from *In Memoriam A.H.H.* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Pastoral Elegies

Some elegies are pastoral, or set in a rural setting. Pastoral elegies may

- be set outdoors in a beautiful, summery landscape
- depict characters as shepherds
- idealize or sentimentalize their settings and characters



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A View of Boston by Thomas Cole

Pastoral Elegies

But oh the heavy change, now thou art gone—
Now thou art gone, and never must return!
Thee, Shepherd, thee the woods and desert caves
With wild thyme and the gadding vine o'ergrown,
And all their echoes, mourn:
The willows and the hazel copses green
Shall now no more be seen
Fanning their joyous leaves to thy soft lays:—
As killing as the canker to the rose,
Or taint-worm to the weanling herds that graze,
Or frost to flowers, that their gay wardrobe wear
When first the white-thorn blows,
Such, Lycidas, thy loss to shepherd's ear.

from *Lycidas* by John Milton

What Have You Learned?

1. An elegy is a poem that mourns a death or laments something lost.

a. true

b. false

2. Elegies sometimes explore profound questions about the nature of life and death.

a. true

b. false

3. Elegies always have gloomy settings.

a. true

b. false

The End